

64 THE DIPLOMATIC BACKGROUND OF 1914

Tirpitz, who was appointed to the Admiralty in 1897, began with the Navy Laws of 1898 and 1900 ; and the vast project of the Bagdad Railway was launched in 1899, carrying with it the political and economic predominance at Constantinople.

In the early stages of these enterprises the danger of Germany shouldering a burden beyond even her gigantic strength was so little realized by William II and his advisers that the golden opportunity presented by British embarrassments in South Africa was allowed to slip.

Before the Boer War cast its shadow over the scene, a slight Anglo-German rapprochement had begun. A secret treaty in 1898 mapped out hypothetical spheres of influence in the Portuguese colonial empire, and Germany obtained a foothold in Samoa in 1899. The seizure of an ice-free Port Arthur by Russia in the spring of 1898 and the Fashoda crisis in the autumn of the same year, provoked by the planting of the French flag on the Upper Nile, emphasized our isolation and turned wistful eyes to Berlin. Commercial competition with Germany was becoming very keen, but it never seriously affected either popular sentiment or official diplomacy.

While Salisbury saw no reason to abandon the practice of keeping our hands free, Joseph Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary, was not the only one of his colleagues who felt the need of a powerful friend to balance the hostility of France and Russia. Without committing the Cabinet he discussed the possibilities of a defensive agreement with the German Ambassador. Never before had a British Minister, officially or unofficially, dangled an alliance before the German Empire, but his advances were coldly received. Such a commitment, in Bismarck's eyes, would inevitably antagonize Russia, with whom Germany had no quarrel and against

whose enormous
army England could furnish no military aid. " At
the present
time Germany, who is confronted with no
immediate or
prospective danger, has no reason to shoulder
the risks of an
alliance. . . . The great majority of the German
people do
not at the present moment believe they are
threatened from the
East. It would therefore be difficult to justify an
alliance
which automatically stamps Russia as our foe."

Billow's attitude never changed, and his
official advisers,
with Holstein at their head, approved it. He was
favourably
impressed by his visit to England in the
autumn of 1899,
when the Kaiser came over for the first time
since the Kruger
telegram, but Chamberlain's arguments made no
more impres-